



Resign or face action — China ‘threatens Zimbabwe President for looking West’

Beijing has reportedly asked Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa to hand over power to China-leaning Vice-President Constantino Chiwenga.

SRIJAN SHUKLA 14 November, 2019 7:12 pm IST

New Delhi: The Chinese government has told Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa to either “resign or retire” from office or face “political action” from Beijing, **according to a report** in *Spotlight Zimbabwe*, an online media publication.

The report said Beijing has also asked Mnangagwa to hand over power to China-leaning Vice-President General Constantino Chiwenga (Retd), who has been in China since July for medical treatment.

Reports suggest that China was responsible for promoting Mnangagwa as Vice-President in 2015 during the presidency of the late Robert Mugabe, who was deposed in 2017 after nearly four decades in power.

Now, Beijing is said to be displeased with Mnangagwa for slowly walking away from Zimbabwe’s “Look East Policy” and refusing to grant several development projects to Chinese firms.

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For a long time, smaller nations have been anxious about China's "debt-trap diplomacy", especially through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, but such overt interference by the Asian giant in another country's domestic politics is unheard of.

Why does China want Zimbabwe's President to resign?

China and Zimbabwe have shared a **deep relationship** since the 1960s, when Beijing "**provided arms and trained** some of the top guerrilla leaders, including Mnangagwa" during the country's struggle against white minority rule.

Zimbabwe has had an ailing economy for decades and China's continued economic assistance has been indispensable for the country.

According to a **December 2016 report** in *The Diplomat*, China invested in at least 128 projects in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2012. And Zimbabwe **is reportedly** China's third-largest destination for foreign direct investment.

Behind this economic relationship was former president Mugabe's "Look East Policy". This policy **ensured** that Chinese firms got preferential treatment when Harare gave out infrastructure development contracts.

However, after coming to office, Mnangagwa started to gradually unwind Zimbabwe's economic dependence on China and unleashed an effort to **diversify** the country's economic relationships.

"The reason China wants him (Mnangagwa) out is because he has made them angry by reneging on a number of deals he made with

Beijing in 2015,” the *Spotlight Zimbabwe* report quotes a former intelligence minister of the country as saying.

Some of the deals Mnangagwa has reneged on include a major contract, promised to China Railway, “to refurbish and reconstruct a new national railway network for Zimbabwe worth billions”. The contract **has now reportedly** been given to a Western firm.

“Mnangagwa also undertook to give China exclusive diamonds and platinum claims in the country, but they have lost to Russia on that front,” said the former intelligence minister.

What is China threatening and how deep is its involvement in Zimbabwe?

Chinese authorities have allegedly used emissaries in Vice-President Constantino Chiwenga’s office to pass the message to Mnangagwa that he should either step down or risk facing “unspecified political action from Beijing”.

“Yes, the possibilities of another coup to topple him (Mnangagwa) are very high. The whole government and even our office is divided over him and Chiwenga,” the *Spotlight Zimbabwe* report quoted sources in the office of the President and cabinet as saying.

There seems to be a discernible pattern when it comes to China’s reported involvement in Zimbabwe’s politics. China has constantly made an effort to ensure one of its preferred candidates in the country’s top political leadership. The following three instances help highlight this pattern.

Back in 2015, when Zimbabwe's economy was in **free fall**, the Chinese government reportedly **lobbied** to get Mnangagwa appointed as Vice-President.

In 2017, a major **political stir followed** revelations that Chiwenga had visited Beijing just a few days before the **military coup** that led to Mugabe's removal.

Now, Chiwenga is again in China and there is news of Beijing allegedly demanding Zimbabwe's President to resign.